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ABSTRACT

Special events defined as being "newsworthy events" are becoming a way of American life. They are also a means for making a lot of money. Examples of special events that are cited most frequently are often the most minor of events; e.g., the open house, the new business opening day gala, or a celebration of some event in an organization. Little mention is made of the extravaganzas which are really focused on community development. These special events are focused on physical attendance by the public. They are complex and warrant serious preparation and study. The consequences of inadequate training in the area of public relations can be seen in the low turnout at AmeriFlora '92 (an international entertainment and horticultural exposition held over a 6-month period in Columbus, Ohio) which was planned to attract 4 million people but only attracted 2 million. The failure of this event calls attention for the need to train public relations students in the area of evaluation--of assessing the success of an event before it occurs. Public relations students must also understand the coordination between the areas of marketing, public relations, and advertising. The study of integrated communication must have a place in the curriculum. AmeriFlora '92 had difficulties for five reasons, of which communication scholars should be aware: (1) lack of issues management orientation; (2) the failure to realize that public relations is more than publicity; (3) numbers of impressions not equal to access to audience; (4) perception stronger than reality--people did not believe that Columbus, Ohio could really host a prestigious event and so it was assumed that exhibits would be of the "garden" type of displays; and (5) lack of clear definition of the event. (TB)

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ASSESSING SPECIAL EVENTS

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ASSESSING SPECIAL EVENTS

A class of special events are becoming more part of the American scene--these events are multifaceted, extensive in scope, high in attendance expectation, and occurring over an extended period of time. A creation of such an event attracts people and is not only newsworthy but can involve a tremendous amount of resources from a community. Here the focus is on the training of the public relations professional to handle such events. Secondly, there is a great deal of attention given to special events as reflecting the social fabric of its environment. Assessing such events is not easy. Here the limitations of the *practitioner in terms of education and training along with the social milieu are examined in terms of the case study on AmeriFlora, an international entertainment and horticultural expo held in Columbus. Ohio.

ASSESSING SPECIAL EVENTS

Special events are becoming a way of American life. Special events are also a means for making a lot of money. It is these elements which drive entrepreneurs and communities to seek events to attract tourists to their community. It is the special event which can reflect most readily the inadequate training of the public relations practitioners and the amplify problems found in a community.

Special events are defined as being newsworthy events. Examples that are cited are often the most minor of events--an open house, a new business opening day gala, a celebration of some event in an organization. Little mention is made of the extravaganzas which are really focused on community development. Here there is a more in depth examination of the special event as those planned activities which have major impact on a community. These events are not campaigns, however, where there are positions taken either proactive or reactive. These special events are focused on inviting the public to physically attend a planned event. This event cannot be experienced or great learning take place through publicity alone. Whereas learning is more the domain of campaigns, special events of this magnitude offer a great opportunity for community development. How complex this is suggests the need for a closer examination of such an activity. Furthermore the fact that the literature does not link special events with ongoing evaluation suggests further there is a major gap in knowledge. A fact which indicates the public relations professional is handicapped by their education.

Case Study Being Examined: Ameriflora '92

AmeriFlora '92 is an international entertainment and horticultural expo held over a 6-month period in Columbus, Ohio. Expecting 4 million people to attend, an enormous controversy erupted when only 2 million visited AmeriFlora. My visit to this site was through happenstance more than awareness of this special event. In fact, after my daughter's dance group had been scheduled to perform on one of AmeriFlora's stages, another mother and I complained the entire drive about what a waste this would be since we had just performed on a cruise ship and in Mexico. It was much to my surprise that once inside the well-designed AmeriFlora site--I was taken aback by the beauty of the landscaping, the creativity of the surroundings, and the high level craftsmanship evident from every corner. Clearly this was event a cut above Disney theme parks. It was this moment of quandary--the reality contradicting our perceptions--that the bottom line struck me--"Someone had no understanding of the role of public relations in executing this special event."[1]

Special Event and Research

Special events are treated in the textbooks as primarily a promotional effort with the media as the primary public to be dealt with. There are outstanding discussions which cover such topics as "Setting Up a Newsroom," "Publicity Spin-offs," "Dealing with the Media During Emergencies," and "Technology."[2] This essentially was the approach of the public relations efforts during AmeriFlora. In fact, the success of AmeriFlora is touted as the 700 million impressions--which alone should have assured the event's success. A closer examination of these impressions later will reveal problems with this assumption.

So the role of assessment or evaluation is very minor in terms of the textbooks discussion on special events. It is the link between a special event and assessment that will give public relations practitioners the knowledge and leverage to make a difference in an organization. However, there are two major impediments to assuring the role of assessment of special events: 1) the lack of training of public relations professionals in evaluation, and 2) the lack of integrating issues management into the evaluation process which is ultimately a leadership problem.

Lack of Professional Training in Evaluation. Assessment is not linked with special events in a sophisticated way. Bottom line suggests that the number of people attending one's event is the sign of success. However, by the time the event is to take place--that criteria is too late. There needs to be more work before an event to assess the situation and certainly a far more sophisticated approach than numbers after the event is over.

In AmeriFlora '92 there were several problems typically found in most special events. There was a constant overturn of personnel. In other words, the lack of continuity in public relations was affected by the constant change in personnel. The person who was hired just prior to the event was a public relations professional from the tourism business. She was hired on the strength of her knowledge of promotions. Her success with the media certainly was an important factor. So the person who finally was responsible for the AmeriFlora event was primarily someone familiar with publicity--the typical promotions approach to special events. Furthermore, this was not the same person who had planned the public relations prior to the event.

The second major problem was the lack of communication between public relations and marketing. This situation was not corrected until June (3 months after AmeriFlora had begun which was halfway through the season). To have no coordination between these two offices seems unbelievable but if the definition of function seems different for the two offices then the coordination appears to not to be needed. Such unfortunate thinking led to another serious communication problem within the AmeriFlora organization. Does this

situation reflect how public relations professionals are prepared--without much sense of the marketing and advertising efforts. Do our students have an appreciation of the coordination needed among the three areas. Does this suggest that integrated communication should be required in our curriculum. Perhaps a closer examination of special events and the roles of the 3 areas of communication could assist in answering some of these questions.

Practitioner's Background. The preparedness of the public relations practitioner in terms of evaluation is minimal and often not directed to special events. Furthermore, the coordination of the public relations efforts with marketing and advertising is also often neglected. Much remains to change this situation but suggestions include the following:.

1. Lack of Issues Management Orientation

While public relations professionals are prepared for crises management in most cases, the role of issues management seems to be minimal. There could be two reasons for this: 1) the leadership of organizations do not wish to emphasize issues management--not part of the agenda), and 2) the public relations professional has been more technically trained for entry level positions and not for the more advanced areas of issues management.

The leadership of AmeriFlora '92 was fraught with controversy. The building of AmeriFlora in a neighborhood park which was heavily African-American was a shock to this community. The refurbishing of the homes surrounding the perimeter of the park was equally upsetting. The opening ceremonies on Columbus Day was a slap in the face for the native Americans. The eventual perceived loss of revenue was very upsetting to the community. It was continuous strife (print as pro vs broadcast media as against AmeriFlora).

None of these issues were addressed through evaluation. In fact, the evaluation of AmeriFlora conducted by the public relations projects class at Valparaiso University, Indiana established that the white leadership never shared power with the People of Color. This paternalist "we will take care of you" attitude without informed consent was alienating the community. Currently, there are reports of racial strife in Columbus, a community with an aging white population and a more populous and young People of Color residents. The entire AmeriFlora was about sharing of power between these two groups. To this day this issue has not been addressed. The anger was so great that the nearby community demanded all but 2 AmeriFlora buildings be destroyed. This means millions of dollars were lost. What does this say to communities involved in community development through special events? What does this say about the role of the public relations practitioner in issues Management. Particularly the role of the public

relation professional as a member of the decision-making team and not as a staff person.

2. Public Relations Defined as Publicity.

And, of course, if budget is of any concern--the organization hires the cheapest public relations person which happens to be the more technically trained individual. Plus this person is perceived as competent to handle what has been defined as public relations--promotions. This very narrow definition of public relations in terms of special events has severely handicapped organizations and professionals in managing anything other than the most routine types of special events: opening day ceremonies, new businesses, etc. How to go beyond the "publicity" model will take some effort--particularly when the media is constantly viewed as being so powerful. In fact, this very designation is crippling public relation greatly. There needs to be much more thought given to this question. Perhaps examining the assumption that the 700 million impressions in the media should be the badge of success--yet failed to bring in the 4 million people. What happened? Why should such a large attendance (two million)--considered an outstanding success by most people in promotions--be considered inadequate. The answer comes in several forms and includes: 1) quantity of publicity does not guarantee an audience is reached, 2) perception of concepts can be stronger than reality, and 3) lack of a clear definition of an event can be a crippling factor when it becomes multiplied a million times in the press. Publicity can work against one's project.

3. Numbers of Impressions not Equal to Access to Audience.

700 million impressions is for most special events a really impressive number. However, the number did not translate into outreach. When the sources were examined it was found that often these impressions were in specialized publications where the audience was quite segmented (horticulturists and florists). These people have a vested interest but do not represent a large segment of society. Often the articles on AmeriFlora appeared in garden types of columns and because of this location an aura of being "small-time" took effect. So why travel to see another "garden" or the attitude was "flowers are not my bag!" Also there was not an effort to reach the local market after a certain point (local criticism too overwhelming). Only those who were willing to travel a distance were frequently targeted with publicity. Eventually this, too, was restricted as budget constraints became greater.

4. Perception Stronger than Reality.

The few communication pieces which clearly presented international entertainment as well as an international horticultural emphasis could not overcome the perception of the event. People could not believe that Columbus, Ohio was able to host such a prestigious event. It was the first international horticultural competition ever held in the United States. But AmeriFlora was more than the competition.

Disney was involved for the first time outside of their own theme parks. Disney designed some of the sites. Other countries--Russia, Japan, Britian-were involved in creating their own "Epcot type" displays. This was the only place where the famous 360 degree theater film on "Life" was seen outside of the World's Fair in Spain. One could travel to Columbus for what Florida, California, Europe, Asia, and the World Fair could offer. Unbelievable and thus no one believed it.

As a result of these misleading perceptions, whenever the horticultural aspect was mentioned people demeaned this to mean just "garden" type of displays, not worldwide competition or exotic. Whenever the foreign display of entertainment and culture were mentioned, people would not think of this being a life-sized living space with major stages, major landscaping and outstanding entertainment.

5. Lack of Clear Definition of An Event.

Disagreement among the organizers created some of the problems. Originally the idea was only to have the international horticultural competition. When the concept expanded to international entertainment and culture, the key ambassador representing horticulture was fired. However, the press continued to talk about the horticultural aspect as the corner stone--even when the competition was over after the first few weeks. It almost seemed like the organizing group thought too small from the beginning.

Then when the emphasis shifted to the beauty of the landscape--the translation kept the "small garden variety" effect. The entertainment and culture aspect was not clearly articulated (actually missed by those living right in Columbus). The announcement of key entertainment came too late if at all. Then the local market was ignored when apathy and resistance was meet. It was certainly an uphill battle that never was won.

THE ROLE OF EVALUATION--

AN ISSUES MANAGEMENT NOT SOLELY A PROMOTIONS FOCUS

One can say this is a movement from a one-way to two-way communication model. Yet even this analogy is not satisfying. The model is really a multicultural approach. An orientation towards listening which integrates a complex set of expectations. This is really more of a movement away from the typical public relations responsibilities. The professional must first think about the issues which are affecting the special event not the promotions aspect. These issues are really the guide to what communication pieces should be developed. However, there is really other aspects which are keeping this thinking from being effective. First, many professionals are not trained to handle issues management. Secondly, leadership does not include the public relations professional. As a consequence the public relations

practitioner does not always know what questions to ask and the public relation's opinion is not sought for the leadership decision making. This gap in education and gap in decision making access needs to be addressed.

Educated for Leadership in Evaluation. Kendall lists a "catalog of evaluation types" in his chapter of "Choosing Evaluation Methods for the Campaign."[3]

> Appropriate evaluation investigates the nature and depth of information the public should be receiving.
>
> Awareness focus determines who knows what about a program or issue and what they know about it.
>
> Cost-benefit analysis looks at the relations between costs and the dollar return on investment in the campaign.
>
> Cost-effectiveness evaluation looks at the relations between costs and nondollar investment.
>
> Criterion-referenced evaluation is similar to goal achievement evaluation; criterion may be from sources other than problem identification research.
>
> Decision-focused evaluation asks what the campaign has produced to aid decision making.
>
> Descriptive evaluation is a nonjudgment effort to find out what happens or happened in the campaign, apart from its goals.
>
> Effectiveness evaluation looks not just at goal achievement but also at the degree of goal achievement.
>
> Efficiency evaluation focuses on whether outcome can be increased without an increase in input for the campaign (special event).
>
> Effort evaluation appraises personnel, staff, and time as an indication of investment in the campaign (special event).
>
> Extensiveness evaluation asks to what degree the campaign (special event) solved the problems identified.
>
> External evaluation uses an outside evaluator to get an objective view of the campaign(special event).
>
> Formative evaluation asks, either during or afterward, how the campaign (special event) can be improved.

Note the addition of special event in parentheses is my own. The most important aspect of this list is that the person who is hired to do the public relations is aware of these approaches and implements these approaches to assume that the special event is tracked carefully before, during, and after the event. The number of published impressions is not the beginning and ending points. Before these publications are counted, many other types of evaluations need to be implemented.

If a public relations is trained in these methods, what are the major impediments to this approach? The answer addresses the problem of leadership. Leadership of the special event which does not integrate a public relations assessment component into the planning does not want their problems addressed.

In AmeriFlora there was no effort to address the issues which surrounded the special event being planned. When the special event was analyzed several key issues arose and included:

1. The local neighborhood surrounding the site was never involved in the project and decisions were impose upon them. (White leadership imposing decisions upon primarily an African American neighborhood).
2. No effort was made to address the complaints by the native American Indians who were upset that Columbus Day was being celebrated. (White male leadership response: Well how were we to know that Columbus was not an "in" thing by the time AmeriFlora was to happen) This is a leadership group which is oblivious to the growing diversity in America.

To try to "muscle" decisions upon people or to patronize them does not work in a community where the population growth is primarily young People of Color.

In no way did the public relations office address these issues. Other ways business was handled indicated a lack of sensitivity.

1. Because AmeriFlora was more of a European pastoral experience and not a Adventure Land hyped party, college students, which made up a sizable portion of the Columbus population, were ignored in the publicity.

2. When the community became embittered in a pro-con argument about AmeriFlora (actually a press vs broadcasting war) the decision was to stop communicating to the local area deciding these people were a loss! Amazing. Instead of reaching out to work with this group, the market was eliminated from further communication.

3. When AmeriFlora was being torn down, the white leadership did try to save many of the multi-million dollar buildings. However, the

alienated People of Color neighborhood vowed to have everything destroyed to prove this could not ever be done again. Two buildings were saved. Here this is a major loss since one building alone could be worth 17 million dollars.

Beyond 700 Million Impressions. The quantity of publicity is only one approach to assessment and often inadequate. Quantity does not tell how effective the publicity was prepared or how well targeted the communication piece was. There needs to be assurance before the communication is sent that the message is clearly stating what should be stated and that the destination is the best target. Prior to this one could do the following:

Focus Groups

News releases, radio and TV spots could be bounced off groups which reflect the community profile. Differences would be addressed rather than tolerated. The focus groups should clearly represent the profile of the community.

Interpersonal Communication

To assess rumors and to demonstrate more involvement, publicity would not be discontinued. Plus to assure that the publicity was viewed as valid, a plan would stress interpersonal communication. Members of the organization would meet with community groups to update and explain what is happening. Groups would be asked to participate in networking the information. In fact, publicity would come after there would be extensive contact with the various community groups. No group would be overlooked. and most certainly the People of Color would be targeted.

Through a rigorous campaign to run an issues management communication approach, the public relations would have more effect. It again demonstrates the narrow image of public relations as publicity is a tremendous disservice to the profession. Furthermore, educational programs which stress the media as the primary approach to the public relations effort are not addressing the real need of a community.

Special events are becoming more and more of an American business. From AmeriFlora '92 we can go to the World Cup Soccer event held in the U.S. to the upcoming Olympics in Atlanta. How one imposes these events upon a community is very important. The degree to which the special event requires intrusion into the community and not simply the utilization of existing facilities will determine more fully the need for public relations efforts. As communities become more and more interested in looking towards special events as a community

development effort, the more crucial it is to have professionals trained to handle the issues.

Does your course of study offer "issues management"? Are your students realizing the limitations of publicity. Do you require your students to study diversity, multicultural issues, as a minor? Is evaluation a component of the program and of all the work that is attempted? These are critical guidelines for the public relations program today.

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